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SUBJECT: RUSSIAN MFA: AFGHANISTAN POST-FM VISIT; IRAN

Classified By: Political M/C Alice G. Wells: 1.4 (b, d).

11. (C) Summary: In a March 21 meeting, MFA Director Maryasov said Russia was evaluating further arms donations to Afghanistan, finalizing the debt relief documents, pushing for CSTO-NATO counter-narcotics cooperation, and sending a drug control official to Kabul in the "nearest future." During his February visit, FM Lavrov urged Karzai to find common ground with Musharraf. The GOR believes Karzai is politically indispensable and remains concerned by local governance, but analyzes the emergence of an opposition National Front in positive terms. Maryasov downplayed the significance of leadership differences in Tehran on Iran's quest for nuclear weapons and stance towards the West. He termed Iranian-SAG cooperation in Lebanon as positive, and urged coordination with Iran on Afghanistan counter-narcotics and infrastructure development efforts. End Summary

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Next Steps in Russian-Afghanistan Relations  
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12. (C) In a March 21 meeting, MFA Director for the Second Asia Department Aleksandr Maryasov said that concern over security dominated GOR thinking on Afghanistan. During his February 23 visit to Kabul, Maryasov explained, FM Lavrov was focused on the "new season" of fighting, worrisome trends in the consolidation of spheres of influence by Taliban leaders, and the expansion of the Taliban presence outside of the southeast and southwest. Lavrov reaffirmed Russia's readiness to render assistance, including deliveries of equipment and small arms. Brandishing the list of Soviet-era weaponry requested by the Afghans, and conveyed via the NATO-Russia Council (NRC), Maryasov said it was being reviewed by the Ministry of Defense. Maryasov queried sources of possible funding for these new supplies, and we underscored appreciation for the GOR's original donation of military equipment and noted additional contributions would be welcome. Maryasov said a mix of donations, concessional sales, and commercial terms was likely. The GOR has invited Defense Minister Wardak to come to Moscow as soon as possible, but has not received a reply.

13. (C) In terms of practical cooperation, Maryasov confirmed that the bilateral agreement eliminating Afghanistan's \$10 billion debt to the Soviet Union would be signed within the next one-two months, and maintained that it was a paper exercise at this stage. He flagged Russian commercial interests in Afghanistan, including the GOR's readiness to help rebuild some Soviet-era infrastructure projects, but was noncommittal on the dimensions of assistance. Maryasov told us that the Russian counternarcotics official would arrive in the "nearest

future" to take up a permanent posting at the Russian Embassy and to coordinate anti-trafficking efforts. Maryasov stressed that the GOR has a range of programs, including bilateral, through the NRC, and via the Commonwealth Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). He repeated Lavrov's public calls for greater development of regional mechanisms to combat narcotics trafficking, expressed disappointment over the lack of progress in moving forward on CSTO-NATO cooperation, and noted CSTO's recent consultations in Kabul with its ministerial counterparts. (Note: Lavrov subsequently has highlighted the divide between CSTO and NATO in a series of public speeches.) Arguing that Iran's interests dovetailed with those of the international community and Afghanistan, and Maryasov pushed for more aggressive coordination among all interested parties in both combating narcotics and supporting infrastructure development.

14. (C) Maryasov noted that Karzai used his meeting with Lavrov to vent about Pakistan's behavior, including accusations of training Taliban cadre. While Maryasov said that the GOR did not doubt the veracity of some of the charges, the Russian message to the Afghan leadership was to be more flexible, to focus on near-term cooperation, and to find common ground with Musharraf. Lavrov undertook to raise Afghan concerns with the GOP and Maryasov thought that the meeting of Afghan-Pakistani Interior Ministers to discuss jirgas was a positive development.

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Views of Karzai and National Front  
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15. (C) The GOR believes that Karzai is indispensable to Afghanistan's political development and stability, with

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Maryasov stressing that there was no alternative to his leadership at present. In contrast to previous discussions where GOR concerns over corruption and the Afghan President's indecisiveness had been stressed, Maryasov described Karzai as "experienced, flexible, and without the ethnic limitations" that have clouded Afghan politics. The GOR remains concerned by central government weakness in the regions and by the quality of some governors. The international community's objective, he stressed, must be to "help Karzai, to prop him up, to make government more effective" both in the center and at the local level. Maryasov was positive on international efforts to strengthen the Afghan national police, noting that Afghans must feel secure for democratic institutions to take root.

16. (C) The emergence of a National Front opposition, Maryasov argued, was natural and perhaps even positive. It was better for an opposition to form legally and openly, rather than take on a clandestine nature. In a best case scenario, it might help to improve the ethnic balance of the power structures and could be a healthy check on government policies. Maryasov underscored that the checkered histories and competing ideologies of the leading participants made him question the viability of the opposition coalition. However, he noted that Karzai's strength -- his status as a leader for all Afghans -- was also his weakness, since he had not built a political structure that would support and sustain his political vision for Afghanistan.

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Iran: "No room for optimism" on leadership struggles  
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17. (C) Maryasov, who has spent the bulk of his diplomatic career in Iran, including four years as Ambassador, concluded that there "was no room for optimism" in predicting "grave and radical" changes in the Iranian government's commitment to its nuclear program or attitudes towards the West. While President Ahmadinejad's power was "objectively" declining, it was not doing so rapidly, and he still "more or less" enjoyed

support among the major political factions. The moderates, Maryasov concluded, were not in a position to officially confront Ahmadinejad or even to criticize him sharply. The GOR paid particular attention to the Supreme Leader's "balancing act;" specifically, whether his system of counterweights and parallel institutions (such as Velayatti offsetting FM Mottaki) would further constrain Ahmadinejad.

18. (C) Maryasov concluded that Iran's nuclear program remained a "national idea," enjoying popularity among all strata of society, including liberals and pragmatists. The differences among factions, Maryasov insisted, were tactical, with former President Rafsanjani and some Qom clergy taking issue with Ahmadinejad's rhetoric and confrontational style. While this group flirted with a tactical freeze of the enrichment program, the GOR was not confident they could gain the upper hand or that, if they did, it would lead to a renunciation of enrichment. Instead, it believed that Iran's goal was to obtain all the necessary technology and then assess the international situation. The GOR disputed whether a final decision on a militarized nuclear program had been made, because Iran did not enjoy the technical competence necessary to launch one. Maryasov said that the GOR took issue with Israeli estimates of Iranian capabilities, viewing the Iranian program as primitive at best.

19. (C) Maryasov characterized Iranian-Saudi cooperation on Lebanon as positive, with Iranian leaders telling the GOR and SAG authorities that they were attempting to "pacify" Hizbollah. The Iranians, Maryasov argued, were practical enough to see that an ideological confrontation between Sunnis and Shiites was not in their national interests and would mitigate the reflexive Iranian response to assist Shiite coreligionists.

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